

“The Cultural Life of Democracy”

University of Zurich, Department of Geography

3 -4 November, 2022, Völkerkundemuseum

Harshana Rambukwella and Benedikt Korf

This workshop is a modest attempt to broaden the critical discourse on democracy by using Sri Lanka as an empirical locus, but adopting a comparative gaze beyond Sri Lanka, and to explore the possibilities of fashioning the ‘cultural life of democracy’ as a conceptual and methodological heuristic to explore democracy and democratization as an actual political practice rather than a political ideal. Politically and intellectually the project aligns with the ‘post-colonial’ spirit of exploring ‘alternative’ accounts of democracy but is also cautious of how populist-authoritarian iterations of democracy have rationalized themselves through claims to alterity. Challenging the dominance of what Chakrabarty (2000) calls ‘hyperreal Europe’ there have been attempts to understand democracy in relation to postcolonial social experience. These include, drawing on the practice of *adda* in Calcutta society as a form of public sphere (Chakrabarty 2000), rethinking democracy from the margins in Chile where the isolated Chachapoyas region has historically resisted integration by self-consciously constructing itself as a pre-modern and pre-political society (Nugent 2002) and examining Islamic forms of democratic participation in Arabian societies that do not follow the Turkish ‘secularist’ model (Rane 2010). Collectively, these can be understood as forms of democratic participation that do not follow a rigid definition of democratic norms. This approach to ‘provincializing’ democracy has also yielded a number of studies that attempt to map civic life in South Asian societies (Orsini 2000; Dass 2015; Scott et al. 2016). The workshop thereby aligns with the agenda of the SINERGIA project “Reversing the Gaze”, which seeks to unsettle the Eurocentrism of democratic theory.

Taking Sri Lanka’s current political crisis as well as its varied history of democracy as a case, this workshop invites critical and comparative reflection on postcolonial theories of democracy, electoral politics and political dissent beyond the Sri Lankan case. The term “cultural life” starts from the supposition that the cultural is often a site of political struggle, but also, that politics develops a cultural life of itself: in the events it celebrates, the rituals it performs, the narratives it produces and the mundane practices it follows in the everyday. Studying how exactly these different modes of political conduct are mobilized and negotiated gives us an insight into “actually existing politics” (Spencer 2007: 177). Studying actually existing politics raises normative questions: We recognize that discourses like ‘post-truth’ have led to an erosion of norms such as ‘civility’, a class-driven but vital norm theorized by scholars like Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu (Thiranagama et al. 2018). Similarly, populist leaders have redefined sovereignty in self-serving ways that draw on the rhetoric of decolonization. The theoretical and political challenge, therefore is in fashioning a stance that recognizes that ‘civility’, for instance, has a loaded colonial history (Thiranagama et al. 2018: 163- 64) – but at the same time does not romanticize populism or restrict democracy to a set of culturally exclusivist markers.

Specifically, the workshop intends to explore the following interdisciplinary questions:

1. What insights can a 'cultural' account of democracy offer for postcolonial societies like Sri Lanka, which 'standard' accounts of democracy and democratization such as the study of democratic institutions, the rule of law, etc., are unable to offer.
2. How can we trace the 'cultural life' of democracy in varied forms of artistic production such as art, literature, film and theatre, but also political activism and events?
3. What are the methodological and conceptual challenges of a project of this nature with its interdisciplinary and methodologically eclectic approach?

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Draft program¹

Day One

Time	Theme	Speaker	Discussant
2.00 – 2.15 pm	Opening remarks and welcome	Benedikt Korf	n.a.
Session 1 – Conceptual considerations			
2.15 – 3:45 pm	'The cultural life of democracy': some preliminary thoughts	Harshana Rambukwella	Jayampathy Wickramaratne
	The fascist feedback loop: Exploring the Intellectual Evolution of Antidemocratic Thinking	Adam Knowles	
	Is Sri Lanka an ethnocracy?	Rajesh Venugopal	
TEA BREAK			
<i>Session 2 – Aesthetics, culture, and democracy</i>			
4.00 – 5:30 pm	Menace: Political violence, policing and desire in Sri Lanka	Sharika Thiranagama	Debjani Bhattacharyya
	The cultural life of Gota go Gama	Neloufer de Mel	
	The Strange Death of *"Violent Lanka"	Jonathan Spencer	
5:30 – 7:00 pm	Apéro riche		
7.00 – 9.00 pm "Donnerstags- kino" (public)	Film screenings followed by discussion (discussants: Sumathy Sivamohan, Udan Fernando, Jonathan Spencer, and Neloufer de Mel)		
	Udan Fernando – Evoking the Kingdom		
	Sumathy Sivamohan – Among the Villus		

¹ Panels: EITHER: two presentations à 20 mins, 5 mins discussant, 30 mins discussion (= 75 minutes);
OR: three presentations à 20 mins, 5 mins discussant, 25 mins discussion (=90 mins)

Day Two

8.30 – 9.00 Coffee and fellowship

Time	Theme	Speaker	Discussant
Session 3 – Politics of Patronage			
9.00 – 10.30 am	Does “patronage” explain (or hide) the “culture of democracy” in Sri Lanka? The case of access to means for agricultural production	Urs Geiser	Jasnea Sarma
	The Carrot and the Stick: Local Government Elections in Punjab	Nicolas Martin	
	A question of place: Land and the national question	Sumathy Sivamohan	
Session 4 – The politics of religion			
11:00 – 12:30 am	Gods into Politics: Seeing democracy from temple politics in Sri Lanka	Sidharthan Maunaguru	Sharika Thiranagama
	The digital geographies of Muslim women rights activism (TBC)	Christine Schenk, Shermal Wijewardena, Neloufer de Mel	
	The political role of the Buddhist Sangha: Cultural life and democracy	Dhammika Herath	
LUNCH 12.30 – 2.00 pm			
Session 5 – The politics of the current moment			
2:00 - 3:30 pm	Aragalaya : A catalyst for democratic reform?	Pradeep Peiris	Jonathan Spencer
	Spatial analysis of the democratic moment in Sri Lanka	Hasini Lecawasam	
	“We have gone past the crowd art”: Aragalaya, agonism, art	Lars Waldorf	
TEA 4:00 - 4:30 pm			
Session 6 – Closure: Reversing the Gaze			
4.00 – 4:30 pm	Reversing the Gaze: The Cultural Life of Democracy elsewhere	Stephan Hochleithner Benedikt Korf	
4:30-5:00	Closing discussion: The Culture Life of Democracy reconsidered	Harshana Rambukwella (facilitator)	
TEA and PARTY (open end ...)			